

Hello, my name is Sandra Turner-Handy and I am the Community Outreach Director at the Michigan Environmental Council. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on this serious environmental justice issue of food access in Detroit.

As the world races to address today's critical economic, environmental and energy issues, Detroit is at the epicenter of some of the most important conversations in the country—how do we rebuild our city in ways that supports current residents while attracting new ones; provide a healthy and attractive natural environment; and offer real economic opportunity for everyone?

Since opening a Detroit-based office in early 2008, the Michigan Environmental Council (MEC) has been meeting and listening to leaders, residents and advocates to determine how local action and state policy can combine to move Detroit toward a cleaner, greener, and socially just vision. Food access in is one serious issue standing in the way of the vision of a greener Detroit.

For too long, Detroiters have been disproportionately burdened by the lack of grocery stores within city limits, and by low access to fresh, healthy foods. A June 2007 LaSalle bank sponsored study explored the nature of food deserts in Detroit. Researchers found a high concentration of food deserts in the City, with the final report noting that "**more than a half million Detroit residents live in areas defined as food deserts** — areas that require residents to travel twice as far or more to reach the closest mainstream grocer than to reach the closest fringe food location."

This lack of access has a range of negative impacts on the people of Detroit, and on the City's environment.

Negative health effects are one burdensome impact that Detroit residents face as a result of a lack of access to grocery stores and healthy food options. The LaSalle Bank study found that the people of Detroit are physically suffering because of their lack of access to healthy, fresh food. The researchers concluded that "as a group, **residents in food deserts are statistically more likely to suffer or die prematurely from diet-related disease** than residents who live in areas with healthy food options."

Detroiters are already faced with major negative health impacts from our industrial legacy, such as poor air quality, and high rates of exposure to lead and other contaminants. There are dire economic and social consequences that result from these cumulative health risks. We need access to quality grocery stores and to fresh foods to reverse these trends and keep Detroiters healthy.

Transportation Impacts

There are also severe transportation impacts from our food desert issue in Detroit. Detroiters are forced to travel further to find food, and some even choose to travel outside the city to purchase fresh foods at suburban stores. Longer trips mean Detroiters are saddled with the burden of transportation and time costs to get to and from the store. Longer trips, and trips to the suburbs mean more congestion on our roadways, and in turn, more issues related to air quality in the Southeast Michigan region. The vehicle emissions that result from these trips also mean that we as a region produce greater amounts of climate-change inducing greenhouse gases.

Meanwhile, not everyone in Detroit is so lucky to be able to make longer trips to access fresh foods. Unreliable or inconvenient public transportation services means that many Detroiters don't have the option of shopping anywhere other than the nearest convenience store.

Economic and Community Impacts

Finally, there are severe economic and community revitalization consequences to our food access issues. When our residents are forced to spend money outside of the city, that is money that does not stay in the community – it cannot be reinvested in Detroit's local economy.

Easy access to grocery stores is a key component to building healthy, livable communities – the kind of communities that can support pedestrian-oriented development and encourage healthy lifestyles. In my work as the Community Outreach Director at MEC, I see how hard my fellow Detroiters are working to make this city sustainable. Without access to places to buy fresh foods, Detroit will remain a less attractive place for people to live, work, and play.